



*Routledge Studies in Media, Communication, and Politics*

# WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE AMERICAN MEDIA

Edited by  
Sarah D. Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner



# White Supremacy and the American Media

This volume examines the ways in which the media, including film, television, social media, and gaming, has constructed and sustained a narrative of white supremacy that has entered mainstream American discourse.

With chapters by today's preeminent critical race scholars, the book looks in particular at the ways media institutions have circulated white supremacist ideology across a wide range of platforms and texts that have had significant impact on shaping our current polarized and racialized social and political landscape. Systematically scrutinizing every media platform, this volume provides readers with an understanding of the ways in which media has provided institutional support for white supremacist ideology, and presents them with the means to examine and analyze the persistence of these narratives within our racial discourse, thus offering the necessary knowledge to challenge and transform these racially divisive and destructive narratives.

*White Supremacy and the American Media* will be of interest not only to scholars working in critical race studies and popular culture in the United States, but also to those working in the fields of Film and Television Studies, Sociology, Geography, Art History, Communication and Media Studies, Cultural Studies, American Studies, Popular Culture, and Media Studies.

**Sarah D. Nilsen** is Associate Professor in Film and Television Studies at the University of Vermont, USA. Her current book project is a cultural history of the NRA's relationship with Hollywood.

**Sarah E. Turner** is Senior Lecturer of English at the University of Vermont, USA. Her current project explores the dialogue amongst the work of Toni Morrison, Claudia Rankine, and Kara Walker.

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Sarah E. Turner**

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To my family with love. SDN

To my dad, who was my inspiration, and my mom, who is  
my support. SET



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# 1 White supremacy and the American media

*Sarah D. Nilsen and Sarah E. Turner*

## Introduction

The 2020 US presidential election revealed a country deeply polarized along racialized lines. Even though President Trump's ideology, as Ta-Nehisi Coates argued in *The Atlantic*, "is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power," Trump secured 46.8% of the total vote with a majority of white voters (57%) supporting his 2020 re-election. "The triumph of Trump's campaign of bigotry," Coates continues, "presented the problematic spectacle of an American president succeeding at best in spite of his racism and possibly because of it. Trump moved racism from the euphemistic and plausibly deniable to the overt and freely claimed" (Coates, 2017). The apparent widespread tolerance of and active support of white supremacy in the US has been a shock to many, as Jamie Bouie, in the *New York Times*, warns us succinctly, "Don't fool yourself. Trump is not an aberration" (Bouie, 2020). *White Supremacy and the American Media* is the first scholarly study of the ways in which mainstream media, including film, television, and social media, has provided an institutional framework for the maintenance and circulation of narratives of white supremacy to a global audience.

The election and presidency of the first African-American, Barack Obama, led many to claim that the United States had reached a point of postraciality—a time in which racial and ethnic differences were no longer socially or politically salient. And yet, the first African-American presidency ended not with a movement toward racial progress but instead toward an overt racist backlash fueled by the Trump presidency. As Ibram X. Kendi has argued, "this idea of a post-racial society was quite possibly the most sophisticated racist idea ever created ...What post-racial ideas did was it said to us racism doesn't exist, racist policy doesn't exist, in the face of all these racial inequalities" (Martin, 2019). As whites in the United States are confronted by their impending minority status due to demographic changes, various elements of the right have merged around white nationalism and white identity, with many white Americans perceiving themselves as a persecuted group. In the 1980s and 1990s, the culture wars were effective in articulating a politics of white ethnic pride that became linked with a politics of white racial resentment. As global, neoliberal economic policies led to unprecedented income disparity

and wage stagnation for a majority of Americans, many economically insecure and downwardly mobile white middle-class men and women turned to the polarized politics of the Tea Party out of concern about race and immigration rather than debt and financial constraints. Survey data shows that many whites broadly believe that anti-white bias is on the rise and that, as BIPOC populations gain new forms of social, political, and cultural power, whites are in turn losing power.

Racial anxiety as a buzzword, not to mention a serious concern, seems to have replaced postracialism in the news and media sites. And as a term, it seems all-encompassing and democratic—no matter what race/color you identify with, you can and do experience racial anxiety—travel bans, border walls, plant closures, disenfranchised white workers, race-based violence and hate crimes—such examples are the hallmark of the current cultural and political moment in this country. And this moment seems to be defined by two seminal figures: one, Obama and a racialized backlash against his presidency and policies; and two, Trump, who is the physical manifestation of this backlash, and whose racialized rhetoric has brought to the foreground of public attention white nationalist sentiments, actions, and agents. *Washington Post* writer Sherri Berman argues that “it is not that racism and anti-immigrant feelings have increased. It is that racial anxieties and concerns about immigration and national identity have become more salient—more relevant to some citizens’ voting decisions” (December 2, 2019). This recognition of concerns regarding the question of national identity fuels the hate speech of white supremacists (obviously), but at the heart of this matter is the utilitarian element of the construct of ‘national identity’—so clearly malleable and manipulated by politicians and media outlets alike.

The perceived loss of power by many whites, combined with the significant rhetorical and political impact of the Tea Party, enabled Trump to make explicit appeals to racial resentment, religious intolerance, and white identity in a way prior Republican presidential candidates were unwilling to do. As Greg Sargent reported in the *Washington Post*, “Trump and his administration systematically downplayed (or actively encouraged) the white nationalist and white supremacist threat” (Sargent, 2020). Former senior Homeland Security analyst Elizabeth Neumann has revealed that officials vainly tried to get Trump to take right-wing extremism seriously for months. What’s more, Neumann has suggested, “Trump continued to make public statements lending tacit support to such groups despite surely knowing that this type of rhetoric encourages them, such as his infamous call for extremist Proud Boys to ‘stand by’” (Sargent, 2020). As *White Supremacy and the American Media* reveals, Trump’s narratives of white nationalism and white supremacy are not new, but they have been sustained and supported by dominant media industries.

During a period of extreme political polarization, American culture has been engaged in an examination of its relationship with racism and its legacy of white supremacy. From May 25 to August 25, 2020, there were over 7,750 anti-racist protests over police violence in 2,400 locations across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. These demonstrations have been recognized

as the largest movement of any kind in American history. Trump's supporters, though, have been defending their America against the 2020 summer of anti-racism. The sociologist Arlie Hochschild, who has written extensively about conservative voters, explained in a 538-page report of the 2020 presidential election that his supporters see Trump as their champion. "They feel that Trump is making *them* great again — their social class and their identity as whites" (Thomson-DeVeaux et al., 2020).

This racial resentment has real and lasting impact on the stability of democratic institutions in the United States. As Coates notes, "To accept that whiteness brought us Donald Trump is to accept whiteness as an existential threat to the country and the world" (Coates, 2017). Even under the politicized leadership of the Trump appointee, Chad Wolf, the Department of Homeland Security's "State of the Homeland Threat Assessment 2020" identified "racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists" as "the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland" (Homeland Threat Assessment, p. 18). A study by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which was published in early 2020, found that American right-wing extremists were responsible "for 330 deaths over the course of the last decade, accounting for 76 percent of all domestic extremist-related murders in that time" (ADL Report: Right-Wing Extremists Killed 38 People in 2019, Far Surpassing All Other Murderous Extremists, 2020).

This collection of original essays written by today's preeminent critical race scholars examines for the first time the ways in which the media, including film, television, social media, and gaming, has constructed and sustained a narrative of white supremacy that enabled the proliferation of white supremacist ideology that has now entered into mainstream American discourse. White supremacy, quoting the scholar Frances Lee Ansley, is not only the "self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups." But also

a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

(Newkirk, 2017)

This edited collection looks at the ways the media institutions have circulated white supremacist ideology across a wide range of media platforms and texts and the significant impact they have had on shaping our current polarized and racialized social and political landscape.

## **Part I: Theories of white supremacy and the media**

The introduction begins with a discussion of the dominant theories of white supremacy as studied and analyzed within the field of critical race studies. In the first chapter, Woody Doane argues that "white nationalism," which

is usually conceptualized as an extremist project, is better understood as fundamental to the entire history of the United States. White nationalist groups and social movements are not separated from the larger society, but are socially, politically, and ideologically connected to the mainstream in ways that reinforce white supremacy. The current manifestation, “Trumpism,” or what Doane calls “the new white nationalism,” is built upon these past efforts. In contemporary white nationalism, there are three core elements: nationalism (an “America First” position vis-à-vis the global system, as well as the less overt position that America is a “white” nation); identification of external and internal threats that are frequently (e.g., ISIS, China, Latin-American immigrants) but not always racialized; and the increased expression and toleration of overt racism. Doane speculates about the future direction of the new white nationalism and the forces to which white nationalists are responding—global challenges to the political and economic hegemony of the United States, the changing racial demography of the US (where “white” Americans are projected to be a minority by mid-century), and the increasing political assertion of domestic communities of color.

The causes and consequences of the 2016 US election have left many troubled. Especially in relation to questions of race, citizenship, and national belonging, the Trump administration is understood as a severe break from political norms. But what exactly is different? In this chapter, Matthew Hughey employs a Du Boisian analysis by drawing upon the “Souls of White Folk” (1920). This text affords us a prophetic and historical lens by which we view the Trump presidency not as an unprecedented rupture in politics, but as a manifestation of a long-standing possession of the American body politic by white nationalism. Through examinations of: (1) the political entrée of Trump through the “Birther” movement, (2) the use and understanding of the campaign slogan “Make America Great Again,” and (3) the Trump administration policy and rhetoric toward US immigration, a Du Boisian analysis allows us to better understand the mundane character of white supremacy as the soul that animates the American civil corpus.

In his chapter, Eduardo Bonilla Silva challenges dominant narratives explaining the rise of Trumpism in America. Specifically, he disputes four ideas that have emerged to account for Trump’s election. First, he suggests that understanding his election as the product of the political activities of the “racists” severely limits our understanding of racism as a collective phenomenon. Second, he questions the notion that Trump’s working-class support was due to “class anxieties.” Third, he argues that despite the rise in old-fashioned racism in Trump’s America, the new racism and its ideology of color-blindness are still hegemonic. Last, he asks analysts and activists alike to realize that the fight for democracy in the turbulent times we are living cannot be equated with an effort to return to “politics as usual,” politics that have maintained the matrix of domination in place.

## Part II: White supremacy and film

In this current political climate, white supremacist rhetoric and calls to “make America great (read white) again” have become normalized with politicians and the media often relying on racial dog whistles that both enable race talk and also ensure silence about race. Utilizing critical race theories such as Haney López’s racial dog whistles and problematic white-centering stories, Sarah E. Turner suggests that while *The Best of Enemies* and *BlacKkKlansman* are not themselves racist, neither are they actively employed in anti-racist work. *The Best of Enemies* is another version of the racial reconciliation film, but in this case the “progressive” white character is a member of the KKK. *The Best of Enemies* (set in 1971) and *BlacKkKlansman* (set in 1972) bring up the issue of representations of white supremacy as linked to a historical past we have left behind, where ignorant white Southerners who didn’t know better were the cause for racism.

Rian Johnson’s 2019 film *Knives Out* has been widely celebrated for ostensibly condemning the white nationalism connected to the Trump administration. Michael J. Blouin argues that the film offers a particularly pointed critique of the paternalism practiced by white liberals, many of whom consider themselves in contemporary parlance, to be “woke.” Despite its self-declared critique of white nationalism, Johnson’s popular whodunnit ultimately retreats into the well-trodden territory of liberal universalism. In other words, rather than promote a sense of racial solidarity or interrogate the power struggles demanded by racial identity, *Knives Out* strips away all signs of genuine antagonism, thus depoliticizing a crisis that has so far proven to be resistant to the exhausted ideals prescribed by many white liberals.

In their chapter, the authors Charise Pimentel, Jennifer Lee O’Donnell, Yasiry Lerma, and Cassadie Charlesworth utilize a Critical Media Literacy framework and methodology to deconstruct the various racial ideologies in the film *Green Book*. Through a racial lens, the authors scrutinize *Green Book*’s use of perspective, character development, narrative omissions and distortions, and specific racial tropes, including white savior, Black exceptionalism, magical negro, and humor as a vehicle for Black acceptance. Through a detailed racial analysis, the authors find that *Green Book* glorifies the white perspective and experience as worthy, insightful, authentic, and compelling while undermining, distorting, and erasing Black identities, experiences, perspectives, and agency. The authors reason that the film held the potential to be a compelling biopic that could elaborate on Dr. Don Shirley’s experiences as a Black musician touring the American South during the Jim Crow era. However, this potential is lost when Dr. Shirley’s white driver, Tony, is designated as the film’s protagonist. As such, the authors illustrate how Tony is not only in the physical driver’s seat of the car he uses to chauffeur Dr. Shirley to the various sites on his tour; he is also in the metaphorical driver’s seat of the *Green Book* narrative. Throughout their analysis, the authors of this chapter contend that the *Green Book* narrative reifies ideologies of white supremacy, thereby supporting the racial status quo in our society.

The January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol by right-wing extremists was not an aberration. Political polarization in the United States has been on the rise since the attacks of 9/11 due to the War on Terror, the 2008 recession, and the election of President Obama, the first African-American president. The militarization of American popular culture following 9/11, exacerbated by the NRA and Christian nationalism, led to the circulation of a white nationalist rhetoric that celebrated white American exceptionalism and sanctioned the use of violent force to eliminate perceived external and internal threats to the homeland. Conservative media outlets profited by marketing white nationalist narratives that lionized violent, white Christian heroes who used guns to eradicate Muslim ‘savages.’ Sarah D. Nilsen argues that these narratives moved from right-wing media sources into the mainstream with the bestselling mythologization of America’s most ‘successful’ killer sniper, Chris Kyle, in his memoir *American Sniper* (2012), and the subsequent film version of the book released in 2014. This essay argues that *American Sniper* represents the apotheosis of this white nationalist narrative, persuading a significant percentage of the population into believing that violent force is justifiable in order to protect the white, Christian American way of life from leftist, secular, and minority threats. As white nationalism proliferated within post-9/11 American popular culture, the Department of Homeland Security and other US intelligence agencies began circulating reports expressing concern about the possible spread of white nationalism and white supremacy within the military and society, and yet the federal response to these concerns were muted or undercut by protests from Republican congressional members and conservative media outlets. Films like *American Sniper* played a demonstrable and intentional role in fomenting the white nationalist ideology that has undercut US democratic institutions leading to the attack on the Capitol. Currently, four in ten Americans who most trust far-right news sources (42%) and around one in four who most trust FOX News (27%) agree that “[b]ecause things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country” (Understanding QAnon’s, 2021).

### Part III: White supremacy and television

Pablo Bose argues that xenophobia and white nationalism have become a dominant feature of contemporary politics, especially in North America and Europe. The turmoil of the Trump presidency, Brexit, and culture wars regarding demographic and social change, ideological divisions and shifting contexts have created a fertile ground for white nationalist movements that are no longer on the fringes of society but often find their rhetoric, fantasies and aspirations reaching mainstream audiences and even the seats of power. A particular target for many white nationalists and right-wing extremists in the current moment are refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, who are held accountable for many of the anxieties that incite white moral panics. Yet how do such anxieties develop in the first place? In this chapter the

author argues that the figure of the refugee has always played a complicated and contradictory role in global culture. While those fleeing persecution and danger have been in some traditions seen through the lens of victimhood and thus deserving of sanctuary, the author argues that equally important are a series of thematic frames structuring news coverage, discourse, and cultural representation that have helped to produce the refugee as a figure of threat. These are the ideas of refugees as a security threat, as a demographic threat, and an environmental threat to existing populations and nations.

Helen Morgan Parmett's chapter takes the ideology of the purity of sport and the field of play as the ground for analyzing the role of contemporary sports stadia in the production of and resistance to white supremacy. Rather than focusing on media representation of sports, she focuses on the material structures of sport stadia as media. Specifically, she theorizes stadia as urban media infrastructures in which media technologies and practices are deeply integrated into the stadium itself, as they are built as sites of media broadcasting spectacle, surveillance, and crowd control. Considering the stadium as a media space, she attends to the design logics and practices through which contemporary football and baseball stadia, the two most popular sports in the US and most closely associated with American national identity, are produced as white spaces that perpetuate white supremacy. Understanding white supremacy as the material practices through which white dominance and hegemony is secured through the exclusion and premature death of BIPOC peoples (Bonds & Inwood, 2016), Morgan Parmett suggests stadia are both the products of and work to institute what Lipsitz (2011) refers to as a white spatial imaginary; or, in other words, that stadia are spaces in which whiteness, white control, and dominance over Others is learned, naturalized, practiced, and resisted.

While the Hulu series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–2021) clearly depicts a dystopian narrative dominated by white supremacy, its failure to address this core characteristic reflects American politics, as well as mainstream white feminism's own unwillingness to address the nation's racist history that continues to repeat itself. Stefania Marghitu and Kelsey Moore Johnson argue that the series' source material, Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, addresses white supremacy and anti-Semitism insofar as the new regime banishes Black Americans to Africa and Jewish Americans to Israel, with the exception of Black post-menopausal woman kept as house slaves known as "Marthas." The televisual adaptation does not pursue the same narrative of ethnic and racial genocide, and handmaids and Marthas are not defined by race, which creates a color-blind narrative. By representing non-white Americans at once experiencing and witnessing the same persecutions as their counterparts, the Hulu series attempted to reverse the racial erasure in Atwood's original work. However, by not drawing attention to the additional racialized consequences, *The Handmaid's Tale* perpetuates the ongoing issues of American politics, feminist movements, and television representation. At their core, the book and series are meant to provide a cautionary tale of both Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump's parallel

administrative actions against women's reproductive rights. However, the symbolism of the handmaid's garb reveals multifaceted meanings that draw on religious, racial, and class-based oppression. This chapter reveals the problematics of only addressing gendered discrimination as singular rather than intersectional, which negates any racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, or sexuality differences in order to perpetuate a white supremacist nation. It further discusses how the series served as a catalyst and symbol of resistance for feminist activism, which allowed for issues of race, class, religion, and ethnicity to be further explored.

## Part IV: White supremacy, social media, and gaming

Stephen King scholar Anthony Magistrale argues that King has been writing fictional versions of white supremacy since the late 1970s when he created the character Randall Flagg in the novel *The Stand*. Flagg is the archetype for all the other wannabe fascists that populate King's novels, from Greg Stillson in *The Dead Zone* to those less obvious politically motivated monsters such as Pennywise in *IT* and Andre Linoge in *Storm of the Century*. In fact, in general terms it is possible to argue that all the monsters in King's universe—both human and supernatural—reflect, to greater or lesser degrees, anti-democratic values. King's creation of white supremacist figures poses a prescient anticipation of Donald Trump's political emergence in 2016. This assertion is confirmed in the acrimonious Twitter war that emerged between King and Trump over the years of the latter's presidency. King's politics are deeply progressive and thus often run into conflict with Trump's regressive and oppressive agenda. This chapter considers the Twitter feed that has fed this conflict in order to highlight the fictional examples of King's right-wing ideologues and their remarkably similar methodologies.

In the penultimate chapter, Megan Condis argues that video game culture has a white supremacy problem. Almost anyone who plays video games could speak to the toxic levels of casual racism that permeate online gaming spaces like background radiation. But as awful as this behavior is when it is confined to the virtual world, it is even more frightening when racist rhetoric in the online gaming community spills over into the real world. There is evidence that online gaming culture is becoming a popular recruiting ground for white supremacist groups seeking to radicalize young white men and that gaming-adjacent spaces like *Steam* and *Discord*. Meanwhile, image boards like *4chan* and *8chan* are playing host to racist and anti-Semitic hate groups as well as to white supremacist manifestos written by real-world mass murderers. This begs the question: what is it about gaming culture that makes it an appealing venue for white supremacists? In this chapter Condis argues that white supremacist recruiters are attracted to online games because online gaming culture has historically privileged whiteness to such a degree that the mere presence of people of color was considered disruptive to the supposedly apolitical and color-blind communities that players were creating. She explains where and how this recruitment takes place across a variety

of platforms and provides some examples of how the gaming industry has unwittingly encouraged (or at least failed to discourage) white supremacist rhetoric in the past. Condis concludes by sketching out some basic guidelines for industry professionals who are invested in taking a stand against hate in their communities.

In “White Female Pain,” Hannah Noel explores the growing body of critical scholarship that studies the strategic rhetorical mechanisms used by white men to maintain white supremacy. Casey Ryan Kelly (2020) asserts a “powerful script of white male victimization” was catalyzed by the 2016 election (p. 2) where men were “aggrieved by feminism, multiculturalism, secularism, and demands for structural equality” (p. 3). Such discourse indexes white men as the casualties of the multicultural movement and identity politics. White identity is “a mobilized political identity” and threat is key to the “acquisition and activation of [such] group identities” (Jardina 2019, pp. 40, 37). White masculine victimhood uses the threat historically marginalized groups pose to white hegemony to activate political and ideological formations (Abrajano et al., 2017; Jardina, 2019). These political identities coalesced in vigilantism during the January 6, 2021 storming of the US Capitol. It would be incorrect, however, to presume that this masculine rhetoric is embodied, performed, and espoused only by white men; such notions reinforce hegemonic masculinity and falsely link masculinity to only cis men. Although scholars have considered how white women perform a good white girl identity (Moon, 1999), a scholarly opening remains around how white cis women also evoke masculine rhetoric while supporting white supremacy. In studying the connections between masculinity, white supremacy, power, and cis women orators, this chapter begins to fill the gap.

As this book goes to press, nearly twenty American states have banned the teaching of critical race theory in their classrooms, seemingly subscribing to former President Trump’s problematic and polemic claim that “Critical race theory, the 1619 Project and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison, that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together, will destroy our country.”<sup>1</sup> This collection of essays makes evident the centrality of critical race theory in conversations, classrooms, and the media as this country struggles to confront the ubiquitous presence and power of white supremacy. It is the first step in the long process of anti-racist and anti-white supremacy work.

This edited collection is a continuation of our previous collections that were some of the first to use critical race theory to study the circulation and representation of color-blind racism and rhetoric in television (*The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-Racial America*, NYU, 2014) and film (*The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema*, Palgrave, 2019). As white supremacy has become a central aspect of mainstream American life, this new edited collection seeks to draw attention to and expand the academic field of media studies and critical race theory and to provide an audience with the means through which to analyze and understand the dominant role that media plays in our current racial reality. This collection will provide

readers and students with an understanding of the ways in which media has provided institutional support for white supremacist ideology. They will be presented with the means to examine and analyse the persistence of these narratives within our racial discourse, thus offering the necessary knowledge to challenge and transform these racially divisive and destructive narratives.

## Note

- 1 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/critical-race-theory-state-bans/>

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## The Best of Enemies and BlackKkKlansman

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## Knives Out and the end of racial politics

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## **"Keep it off the field"**

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## Whiteness and the ambiguous racial politics of Hulu's

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